Department of Investigation
Press Release

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DOI ARRESTS DOH BOOKKEEPER FOR STEALING $1,100 IN RESTAURANT FINES

EDWARD J. KURIANSKY, Commissioner of the Department of Investigation (DOI), today announced the felony arrest of NORMA HIDALGO, a City Department of Health (DOH) bookkeeper, for stealing $1,100 by misappropriating 4 money orders submitted by restaurants to pay fines for health code violations, making false entries in a DOH database to cover up the thefts, and then fraudulently negotiating the money orders.

According to Commissioner Kuriansky, HIDALGO was an employee at the DOH Administrative Tribunal at 2 Lafayette Street in lower Manhattan, a panel which annually adjudicates about 32,000 health code violations and imposes some $25 million in fines, ranging from $100 to $2,000 each. HIDALGO's job was to collect checks and money orders from litigants paying fines, issue them receipts, and then enter the payments in the City's management information system database.

Commissioner Kuriansky said, "The defendant apparently thought her 'insider' access gave her a license to steal, but she could not have been more mistaken. Together with DOH, DOI is constantly monitoring all aspects of DOH's operations to catch cheaters early and prosecute them swiftly."

The investigation began in March when DOH conducted a routine database quality assurance check, discovered irregularities in data entries made by HIDALGO for 3 different restaurants, and referred the matter to DOI.

The investigation disclosed that, in February, 4 different DOH litigants, including restaurant owners, employees, and representatives, submitted to HIDALGO 4 blank money orders--2 from Travelers Express and 2 from the U.S. Postal Service--in amounts ranging from $200 to $400. The 4 money orders included: (1) a $400 money order submitted on February 28 by a restaurant employee as payment of a fine for a January 5 inspection violation for failure to have a properly trained employee supervising the restaurant's kitchen; (2) a $300 money order submitted on February 27 by a restaurant representative as payment of a fine for a January 3 inspection violation for rat droppings observed in foods at the restaurant; (3) a $200 money order submitted on February 28 by a restaurant owner as payment of a fine for January 8 inspection violations for flies and failure to keep food above 140 degrees; and, (4) a $200 money order submitted on February 1 by a restaurant representative as payment of a fine for a December 5, 2000, inspection violation for failing to have a valid DOH permit to operate a restaurant.

The investigation further revealed that HIDALGO issued fake DOH payment receipts to all 4 litigants, created false entries in the DOH database to conceal the thefts, filled out the 4 blank money orders, making herself or a

family member the payee, and then fraudulently negotiated them. All 4 restaurants told DOI investigators that they had paid their fines with a money order, and had been issued what appeared to be a legitimate DOH receipt.

HIDALGO, 37, of 137 Nelson Street in Brooklyn, a DOH provisional bookkeeper since December 2, 1999, who was earning $15.81 per hour, or about $550 a week, has been terminated. HIDALGO was charged with Grand Larceny in the Fourth Degree, Computer Tampering in the Third Degree, and Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, all Class E felonies. If convicted, she faces up to 4 years in prison.

Commissioner Kuriansky expressed his sincere appreciation to DOH Commissioner Neal L. Cohen, M.D., and members of his staff, for their assistance and cooperation in the investigation.

The investigation was conducted by Kyle Sturcken, DOI Inspector General for DOH, Chief Investigator Bradley Howard, Special Investigator Arlene Matos, and Detective Vinessa Toyer of DOI's Investigative Squad.

The case is being prosecuted by the Office of Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau. Assistant District Attorney Jonathan Berger, of the DA's Special Prosecutions Bureau, is handling the matter.